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U.N. and International Officials Launch Global Effort to End Distracted Driving

New York, NY – Secretary General Ban Ki-moon and senior representatives from the United States and Russia appeared at the United Nations headquarters in New York today to launch a global effort to address the growing and deadly epidemic of distracted driving. Secretary Ban was joined for the announcement by U.S. Ambassador Susan Rice, U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, Russian Ambassador Vitaly Churkin and Jennifer Smith, President of FocusDriven, a victims' advocacy organization based in the U.S.

With approximately 600 million passenger cars on the road today and 4.6 billion cell phone subscriptions worldwide, drivers talking and texting behind the wheel is becoming a growing public safety threat. Distracted drivers are about four times as likely to be involved in a crash as those who are focused on driving, and drivers who are texting are more than 20 times more likely to crash than non-distracted drivers. In 2008, nearly 6,000 people were killed and more than half a million were injured in crashes involving distracted driving in the U.S. alone.

Today, U.N. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon issued a directive to more than 40,000 United Nations staff, barring employees from texting behind the wheel while driving U.N.-owned vehicles. Similarly, President Obama signed an Executive Order last fall prohibiting nearly 4 million U.S. government employees from texting while operating government-owned cell phones, vehicles or while on official business.

The rapid increase in cell phone use around the world threatens to exacerbate an already worsening traffic fatality rate worldwide. Today, road crashes claim 1.3 million lives each year, the equivalent of one death every 30 seconds. By 2030, the World Health Organization projects that traffic crashes will climb from the ninth to the fifth leading cause of death worldwide. The vast majority of road crashes result from preventable driver behavior.

The State Department has already asked its U.S. embassies around the world to raise awareness about distracted driving, as well as to collect data about distracted driving from other governments.

Ambassador Rice said, “Texting while driving isn’t a harmless little habit. It’s a killer. It affects every nation on Earth. The suffering it causes is terribly direct and immediate—lives lost for no reason, futures shattered in an instant. But its toll is truly global. So this is a problem that needs global attention and action.”

“Distracted driving isn’t just a deadly epidemic in the U.S. – it’s a threat around the world,” said Secretary LaHood. “We believe our nations can do more to stop distracted driving if we work together. The Obama Administration stands ready to work with other countries so that we can put an end to dangerous driving behaviors and make the world’s roads safer for everyone.” Many other governments are also moving to put an end to distracted driving. To date, 32 countries – including Russia, Brazil, France, Japan, Jordan, Spain, Taiwan, and the United Kingdom – have passed laws that restrict drivers’ use of handheld devices. Portugal has outlawed all phone use – hand-held or hands-free – in the driver’s seat.

Ambassador Churkin said, “The call for action we are making today is very timely and important. Distracted driving is one of the major risk factors for road traffic crashes. It was highlighted during the First Global Ministerial Conference on Road Safety held in Moscow last November and is reflected in the UNGA resolution 64/255 ‘improving global road safety’ which was presented by Russia. Russia is ready to engage with the United States and other interested countries in defining the ways to mainstream it into global road safety cooperation agenda.”

The officials were joined by FocusDriven President Jennifer Smith, who founded the first anti-distracted driving victims’ advocacy organization in the U.S. Mrs. Smith’s mother, Linda Doyle, was killed by another driver distracted by his cell phone, and after meeting other victims at Secretary LaHood’s national Distracted Driving Summit last fall, she worked to establish a non-profit modeled on the success of Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) to give a voice to victims and their families. “The distracted driving epidemic is a global problem,” said FocusDriven President Jennifer Smith. “We are losing mothers, sons, friends and loved ones every day because of a phone call or text message. By working together we can help prevent others from experiencing the same senseless, preventable loss that I and countless others have endured. I look forward to working with Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, U.S. Ambassador Susan Rice, U.S. Transportation Secretary Ray LaHood, Russian Ambassador Vitaly Churkin to eliminate cell phone use while driving.”

The global anti-distracted driving effort launched today also has an active online component that will allow other countries, safety organizations, and anti-distraction campaigns to share news and research as well as multimedia and other information. Facebook users can find out more about the campaign as well as other anti-distraction groups and events by visiting <http://www.facebook.com/gcedd>, the Global Call to End Distracted Driving Facebook page. The U.S. Department of Transportation also hosts an official U.S. government website to devoted anti-distraction news and information at, www.distracted.gov.